

“DECLARATION OF EDUCATION: TOWARD A CULTURE OF ACHIEVEMENT IN  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS”

Opening Statement of Chairman Davis  
Committee on Government Reform  
May 20, 2005

Good morning, and welcome to today’s hearing on the District of Columbia’s Public School System.

At a time when so many things are going right in the Nation’s Capital, DCPS continues to be plagued by management problems, declining enrollment, crumbling facilities, escalating violence, and substandard academic achievement. We are here this morning to discuss how the renaissance occurring elsewhere in the District can be mirrored in its classrooms.

The fact is, the District’s improved health cannot be sustained without a better public school system. The lack of performance improvement threatens future growth and stability. It leaves parents and families with unenviable or unattainable choices: move out; try to switch to charter schools with mixed records themselves, or win the lottery for a scholarship to a private school through the D.C. School Choice program; or succumb to the fact that their children are going to have to succeed in spite of, *rather than because of*, the educational climate around them.

The good news is, there’s a new sheriff in town. The arrival of Superintendent Clifford Janey offers an opportunity to begin anew. Dr. Janey has recently unveiled an ambitious plan – a “Declaration of Education” – aimed at raising academic achievement in every classroom, in every school. The Committee did not invite him here today to lecture him, or offer unsolicited pointers. We invited him to hear more about his vision, and to ask him how we can help him succeed.

We all know what he’s up against. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, only ten percent of 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders are proficient in reading. Only seven percent of 4<sup>th</sup> graders and six percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders are proficient in math. In 2003, the average D.C. Scholastic Achievement Test score was 978 while the national average was 1026.

Seven of the 27 schools serving 8<sup>th</sup> graders offer no foreign languages. Half of the schools have no vocational education teacher, one-third have no art teacher and one-third have no music teacher. Even John Phillip Sousa Middle School has no band – and no music courses.

DCPS also faces the challenges of instructing a high percentage of disadvantaged students. 62 percent are eligible for free/reduced lunch compared with the national average of 39.7 percent. Students living in low-income families were six times more likely than their peers in higher-income families to drop out of high school, according to a study completed by the National Center for Education Statistics. District officials have reported an alarming dropout rate of 40 percent.

Almost half of all D.C. public schools have been classified as being "in need of improvement" under requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. The classification is based on 2004 test scores in math and reading. The number of schools identified as "in need of improvement" increased from 15 in 2003 to 71 in 2004. Nearly 1,400 teachers are not properly credentialed. Some have not obtained a license in the subject they are teaching or have expired licenses.

Another issue of concern is the high truancy rate. Last year, DCPS reported that it had 20,845 chronic truants and a 23 percent overall truancy rate. The District's truancy rate far exceeds that of Prince George's County (1.8 percent), Fairfax County (0.6 percent) and Montgomery County (0.9 percent). School principals have said the data largely reflects problems with computer systems that keep track of students, poor record keeping and personnel problems. We hope to hear more about this today from the various city agencies collaborating on this front.

And then there are the challenges of crime, dilapidated buildings, and ongoing labor negotiations.

Not all the news is bad. The number of D.C. high school graduates continuing on to college increased 28 percent between 1998 and 2003, due in large part to the DC TAG program, which levels the playing field for D.C. high school graduates by allowing them to attend state colleges and universities at in-state rates. But we can do better.

For students to take full advantage of this program, *all* students need to be prepared to attend a higher education institution. I grew up in a single-parent home, believing from an early age that I was going to graduate from high school and then go to college. That was the standard set for me and my siblings and most of my friends. But this is not the standard for too many students in DCPS. We are letting these children down.

What Superintendent Janey's arrival offers is a chance for stability. For perseverance. For optimism. We can all agree that DCPS is a broken system. Now we need to agree on a strategy to fix the problem. We have with us today many of the players who will determine in large part whether this chapter succeeds or fails. I'm eager to learn more about how reform efforts are proceeding and how students, teachers, administrators, parents, and elected officials can support the plan. It's time to change the course.